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The Problems with Retaliation

Four ex-CIA chiefs weigh the options for countering terrorism



Frustration and anger over the TWA hijacking have fed the desire to find some way to do to terrorists what they are doing to American citizens. Why not, in future crises, threaten and perhaps take the lives of hijackers? Might swift retribution deter terrorists, or at least punish them? What about covert counterterror, the capacity to identify and eliminate terrorists, pre-emp-



Navy strike team trains in California

"If there are casualties, so be it."

tively or in retaliation? TIME Washington Bureau Chief Strobe Talbott put these questions to four former directors of the Central Intelligence Agency. All agreed that the U.S. should move vigorously and effectively to oppose terrorism but not adopt assassination as an instrument of policy.

Each of the former CIA chiefs has had other experiences that bear on the current challenge. Richard Helms (Director of Central Intelligence from 1966 to 1973) spent many years in the CIA's clandestine services and was Ambassador to Iran from 1973 to 1976, so he knows about Shi'ite fundamentalism firsthand. James Schle-

singer (DCI from January through June 1973) was Secretary of Defense from 1973 to 1975. William Colby (DCI, 1973 to 1976) ran the highly controversial Phoenix counterinsurgency program in Viet Nam from 1968 to 1971. And at the request of Annapolis Classmate Jimmy Carter, Stansfield Turner (DCI, 1977 to 1981) came to the CIA from a career in the Navy. Their interviews with Talbott follow.

RICHARD HELMS

It is very important to keep these incidents in perspective and not get so incredibly worked up over them. Terrorism, of course, is a serious challenge, and we must do our best to deal with it. But to declare a "war on terrorism" is just to hype the problem, not solve it. The quiet, steady approach is better than bombast.

As for assassination, it's just not on. The people of the U.S. won't stand for it. In fact, there are problems with all levels of violent action. Let's say the Delta Force puts on masks and goes in and blows up an installation around Beirut. We've violated the sovereignty of Lebanon and killed a lot of people in cold blood. Are they terrorists? You'll have a lot of argument about that, just on our side alone.

What if you send in a coup-de-main group of civilians [a hit team]? If it comes out that they were Americans—and it takes no time at all for that kind of thing to unravel in public—you're facing all sorts of allegations.

If, instead, the blow-and-burn stuff is done by surrogates whom you've trained in the black arts and given a suitable cover, there is a whole other set of problems. If you've recruited them from dissidents who have an ideological motivation, they may be very hard to control. You may think you've called the operation off and wake up one morning and find out they've gone and done it anyway.

Let's say we have reason to believe that Khomeini or Gaddafi is behind some terrorist act, so you decide to strike by attacking the Iranian oil fields or a Libyan air force base. In the latter case, you've now got all the Arabs against you. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the moderates will feel immense pressure to line up with their Arab brethren. We've got to get used to the disagreeable fact that there really is no quick fix for terrorism. What we do need is improved intelligence work against terrorist groups. Penetration can help derail the nasty stuff. When I was in the agency, the CIA penetrated the P.L.O., and we helped head off several terrorist acts, including an assassination attempt against Golda Meir.

We also need improved cooperation among free-world intelligence services. As long as we have a leaky Congress and a leaky oversight process, friendly services

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